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Three State Recidivism Study

September 30, 2001

**Submitted to the Office of Correctional Education
United State Department of Education
by**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Correctional Education Association conducted the *Three State Recidivism Study* for the United States Department of Education Office of Correctional Education. The study was designed to see if education, independent of other programs, could have significant impact on the behavior of inmates after release. Data on about 3,200 inmates, who were released from Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio prisons in late 1997 and early 1998, are reported in this longitudinal study. The research design, which uses educational participation while incarcerated as the major variable, measures the impact of education while incarcerated on post release behavior, primarily recidivism and employment. The states pooled their data in a format that allows for individual state as well as aggregate reports. Within each state the correctional, parole and probation, education and work force agencies cooperated in the data collection.

When the study began each state determined 1,000 or more people about to be released from their state prisons. This type of research design, called a release cohort, provides for a framework with internal control groups.

The research tools were designed by a number of correctional researchers. The Pre-Release Survey was developed to gather information from the inmates themselves on factors closely correlated with criminal behavior. These included information on socio-economic factors, criminal behavior, family life, educational experiences and work history. The Educational/Institutional Data Collection Form contained questions that included criminal behavior, demographic information, institutional behavior and education history during incarceration. The Parole/Release Officer Survey contained questions designed to collect data on subsequent criminal behavior, employment and educational experiences. Post Release Criminal History Data was collected to measure

recidivism. Employment data was collected to find out about the kinds of jobs and the amount of wages earned after release.

Inmates, about to be released, were assembled in the various institutions where the Pre-Release Survey was administered by trained staff. Those who did not want to take the survey were excused. The refusal rate was very low. Inmates put their answers on scan sheets. Criminal history and educational data from the education and correction records were collected from the various agencies using the Educational/Institutional Data Collection Form in either an electronic or a scan sheet format. After release the parole officers were sent the Parole/Release Officer Survey for behavioral, educational and employment information for the ex-offenders under their supervision. In two states, the state departments of labor were able to contribute Employment Data for post release employment and wage information. Finally, re-arrest, re-conviction and re-incarceration data were collected from state Criminal History Data files. The federal Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics commonly uses these three areas to describe recidivism.

All the information obtained from the surveys and state databases were entered into one large database to allow for individual state and aggregate reports. Over 500 variables were collected on each of the study participants, resulting in a very large quantity of information. There are demographic data on family and community background, economic status and employment, educational experience, offender perspectives on education and motivational factors that correlate highly with criminality as well as educational, correctional and criminal history. This is the first study to collect extensive information from the inmates themselves.

Another unique aspect of the study is the collection of individual wage data from two of the states labor databases. Data was collected from each state, but only Maryland

and Minnesota was useable. The Ohio data was in a format that could not be read by the researchers.

The analysis of the data indicates that inmates who participated in education programs while incarcerated showed lower rates of recidivism after three years. For each state the three measures of recidivism, re-arrest, re-conviction and re-incarceration were significantly lower. The employment data shows that in every year, for the three years that the study participants were followed, the wages reported to the state labor departments were higher for the education participants compared to the non-participants.

The following report narrates the overall design, execution of the study, data analysis, discussion of the results and conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Correctional educators have worked for years in the belief that education not only provides hope for their students and an avenue for change, but that it also reduces the likelihood of future crime. Correctional educators have continued to teach while facing constant scrutiny and pessimism from the public and from certain legislators about the value of their work among those who have committed serious crimes. While the climate was always difficult, Congress got much tougher on crime in the 1990s. Inmate eligibility for Pell grants for post secondary education was entirely eliminated in 1994. Federal adult and vocational education set asides for correctional agencies were dropped a few years later. There were even limitations put on the right to special education services for the incarcerated. Many states also cut back or eliminated their funds for programs. One state even fired all the full time teachers in the state prisons.

In the meantime correctional educators have continued on in their effort to convince the public and legislators of what they believe is a worthwhile contribution in the ongoing battle to reduce the recidivism of incarcerated offenders returning to their homes and communities. However, as noted in the next section, while there have been a studies examining correctional education, there is a dearth of **rigorous** studies examining the impact of correctional education on post-release behavior particularly recidivism. It was apparent that valid and reliable empirical data was needed to determine if correctional education did, in fact, help reduce recidivism and increase the incarcerated offenders' participation in the labor market after release from prison.

Literature Review

In an attempt to counter the efforts at cutting back or eliminating correctional education there have been a variety of studies conducted since 1990 to measure the value of correctional education including GED participation, vocational training, cognitive

skills programs, and post-secondary/college participation (Flanagan, 1994; Eisenberg, 1991; Saylor and Gaes, 1991; Menon, et al., 1992; Jenkins, Pendry, and Steurer, 1993; Smith and Silverman, 1993; Porporino and Robinson, 1992; Little, et al., 1991; Gainous, 1992). Most of these occurred in the early 1990's with little being done during the last five years (1996-2001). Texas, however, has consistently examined the impact of their correctional education programs and has provided the most comprehensive studies with large sample sizes (Fabelo, 2000).

Unfortunately, many of them have had a number of research design weaknesses. The Three State Study was rigorously designed to eliminate most of these weaknesses and answer the question -- is there any value in education for the incarcerated?

A detailed literature review was developed prior to this study. An updated review can be obtained from the Correctional Education Association.

Purpose of the Research

. Most states were struggling to keep education programs in the prisons and did not have the money for research needed to examine their correctional education programs. Thus, the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Correctional Education, saw the need for a study to assess whether or not correctional education programs were reducing the risk of recidivism for those inmates reentering their communities. Although many believe that there are numerous other social and economic benefits to be gained from educating inmates, this study focused primarily on the recidivism outcome. While not initially planned as part of the study, the focus of the research was extended to include wage and earnings data as well. Because of the difficulty associated with accessing wage and earnings data related to laws regarding confidentiality of social security numbers, this information has been rarely examined in the context of the impact of correctional education. In addition, a great deal of demographic/background data was

collected from the study participants to really look at carefully the characteristics and needs of incarcerated offenders who participated in correctional education and those incarcerated offenders who did not participate. This was done to gain information that could assist correctional education administrators in their strategic planning for correctional education programming.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section of the report, the methodology for the OCE/CEA Recidivism Study is outlined. Research hypotheses, research design, study limitations, sampling procedure, study population, data collection instruments and measures, data collection procedures, and data analyses are included in the discussion.

Research Hypotheses

The primary focus of the OCE/CEA Recidivism Study was to track the performance of correctional education participants and a comparison group of non-participants in the community after release from incarceration. Specifically, the study assessed the impact of correctional education on recidivism and post-release employment as well as post-release behavior of those on parole or supervised release. The study hypothesized that participation in correctional education programs would result in reduced rates of re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration compared to non-participants (Hypothesis 1-3). The study also hypothesized that for participants who did recidivate, they would commit less serious offenses (Hypothesis 4) when compared to non-participants. We also hypothesized that post-release behavioral compliance with parole/release conditions and participation in pro-social activities would be higher for correctional education participants compared to non-participants (Hypothesis 5&6).

The seventh hypothesis was that participation in correctional education programs would result in higher rates of employment for participants, as well as higher wages (Hypothesis 8) than those of non-participants.

Research Design

Criminal Justice research often precludes, for legal and ethical reasons, randomization for selection of experimental and control groups. Many times, in

correctional settings, there are also practical and administrative obstacles that do not allow the type of rigorous methodology employed in an experimental design. Thus the OCE/CEA Recidivism Study utilized a quasi-experimental design which is an accepted methodology commonly used in criminal justice/corrections research. The main distinction between experimental and quasi-experimental designs is the lack of random assignment to a treatment or control group. Therefore when randomization is not possible, using a quasi-experimental design with close attention to procedures for selection of the study groups, techniques for measuring dependent variables, and utilization of other controls are methods that can reduce threats to the validity of the research and increase the rigor of the study (Maxfield and Babbie, 2001, p. 176). While a quasi-experimental design is practical for use in settings such as corrections, this design does not sacrifice the ability of the study to examine the impact of a treatment as long as an assumption of comparability can be met between the treatment and control group.

In this research, we used a release cohort (a group of inmates being released from incarceration during a certain time frame) for our study population. A cohort study is a methodology employed in quasi-experimental designs for nonequivalent groups where there is a belief that the treatment group does not systematically differ from the comparison group on important variables. Only after the release cohort is selected would data that would identify the cohort participants as either the treatment or comparison group be collected. This design takes advantage of the natural flow of cases through the criminal justice process with an assumption that the treatment group and the comparison group are similar on key variables known to impact recidivism and employment. Part of the research can also be categorized as a longitudinal study since the release cohort was followed for a three-year period following release from incarceration for measures of recidivism and employment.

Limitations

There were three main study limitations for this project. First, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, randomization of the study participants was not possible. To address this limitation, a release cohort was used to select the treatment and control groups to be studied. Second, the findings cannot be generalized to other settings. The study groups were selected from three states – Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio. Other states may have characteristics that could impact recidivism and employment outcomes differently than the three states in the study. For example factors such as how criminal acts are defined by each state's statutes, state sentencing guidelines determining who goes to prison, how criminal history data elements are reported to the state's criminal history repository, and the quality of the state's employment data could impact study outcomes in other states. However, the results of this study provide a general framework for continued research on the efficacy of education programs in correctional settings.

Third, the extent of educational involvement by months or hours is not absolutely known for the entire study group. Although some data was collected on months involved correctional education for a number of different programs, it was only for a portion of offenders in the study, thus making it difficult to assess the impact of length of time of participation in correctional education on recidivism. Record-keeping for these data elements was inadequate in all three states for a number of different reasons: (1) failure by education staff to maintain data in a systematic manner that could be reported with any confidence at the institutions (attempts to figure hours based on good/gain time credits given to inmates were rejected by the researchers); (2) movement of offenders to different institutions for security/custody purposes which meant attendance records were often lost in the process of files being moved with the inmate; and (3) inadequate

management information systems at the central offices. Since the study was conducted, the three states have implemented better management information systems for correctional education programs utilizing computer-based reporting either through the World Wide Web or through their own network systems.

Sampling Procedure

Originally Maryland, Alabama, and Ohio volunteered to participate in the study but the logistics could not be worked out in Alabama. With Alabama unable to participate a third state was sought for the research, and consequently Minnesota volunteered. This gave us an opportunity to examine correctional education in a small prison population (Minnesota), a medium-size prison population (Maryland) and a large prison population (Ohio). We wanted a large enough sample to look at a number of different variables so we decided to select 1000 inmates from each state for a total of 3,000 inmates in the study group. To generate a release cohort, we selected the entire population of inmates being released within a specified time period rather than a sampling.

In order to identify the release cohort, each state's Department of Corrections was asked to generate a list of inmates who were going to be released during the next several months until a list of 1200 from each state was reached. Information included the inmates' projected release date and the institutions from which they were being released. Over sampling was done to address those who might be released early and would not be available for the study. This list with the pertinent information was provided to the data collectors for each state. Table 1 shows that overall there were 3170 in the release cohort: 1373 (43.3%) correctional education participants and 1797 (56.7%) non-participants. Each state's sample size is as follows: Maryland - 275 (31.1%)

participants and 610 (68.9%) non-participants; Minnesota – 574 (54.6%) participants and 477 (45.4%) non-participants; and Ohio 524 (42.5%) participants and 710 (57.5%) non-participants. Having the opportunity to include over 3,000 offenders in the study, makes this research one of the largest and most comprehensive studies ever conducted assessing the impact of correctional education on post-release behavior.

Table 1: OCE/CEA Recidivism Study Cohort

	Correctional Education				<u>Totals</u>
	<u>Participants</u>		<u>Non-Participants</u>		
	N	%	N	%	
Maryland	275	31.1	610	68.9	885
Minnesota	574	54.6	477	45.4	1051
Ohio	524	42.5	710	57.5	1234
Total for all states	1373	43.3	1797	56.7	3170

Population

The study group was comprised of the entire population of a cohort of inmates released from incarceration during 1997 and 1998 in Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio. After the release cohort was identified, the cohort was separated into two groups – education participants and a comparison group of non-participants. As stated earlier, the selection of a release cohort is a method used for non-equivalent “treatment” and comparison groups with an assumption of comparability. However, to further ensure the comparability of the two groups, significance tests were conducted for several key characteristics to see if the two groups differed on important variables that might impact the recidivism and employment results. Table 2 provides the characteristics and

description of the two groups (education participants and non-participants) and indicates whether or not they were significantly different on any of these variables.

Study Group Description/Characteristics

Certain demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and living environment place offenders at greater risk for recidivism. We wanted to compare the two study groups, participants and non-participants, on these key variables to determine if either study group was at greater risk of recidivism when compared to each other. What we found is that the mean age of the participants was 30.8 years and 32.6 years for the non-participants. As is typical in prison populations, a large majority in both groups were male (87.6% of the participants and 88.7% of the non-participants) while only a small number were female (12.4% of the participants and 11.3% of the non-participants). Forty percent of the participants were white, 52.9% were African American, 3.3% were Hispanic, 2.6% were Native American, 0.6% were Asian/Pacific Islander and 0.4% were classified as other. For the non-participants group, 36.4% were white, 57.7% were African American, 1.7% were Hispanic, 2.5% were Native American, 0.6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.1% were classified as other. A little more than ten percent of both groups reported that English was a second language for them. More than half of the survey respondents (56.3% of participants and 60.7% of non-participants) reported being from large cities/urban areas. Only 5.6% of the participants and 6.1% of the non-participants reported living in a rural area before their current incarceration.

Of these demographic variables, the participants and non-participants were significantly different on age and race. Based on previous research, the difference in age (younger) puts the participant group at higher risk for recidivism while the difference in

race (non-whites) places the non-participants at higher risk for recidivism (Schmidt & Witte, 1989; Smith & Akers, 1993).

Family stability can also impact recidivism. Such factors as being married, having children to support, and being financially able to take care of your family can reduce the risk of recidivism. Thus when we examined the family variables, we discovered that the majority of both the education participants and non-participants were single, divorced, or separated. Nearly half of the study participants who had children were financially responsible for their support (45.7% of the participants and 46.2% of the non-participants). Both groups were equally likely to have received some type of public assistance prior to their current incarceration including food stamps, welfare, AFDC, Medicaid and public housing, and they were equally likely to have family members currently receiving public housing assistance. Overall there were no significant differences between the two groups on any of the family variables.

Research has shown that employment is a key factor in the successful reentry of offenders into the community after incarceration. When we examined and compared the two study groups on employment variables we found that over a quarter of the survey respondents (27.3% of the participants and 26.5% of the non-participants) had not held a legal job in the year prior to incarceration. Nearly 40% of both groups also reported that during their lifetime they had held seven or more jobs. Considering the mean age of both study groups, they were changing jobs regularly. Only 55% of the participants compared to 64.4% of the non-participants had held a legal job one year or more (statistically significant). Of the participants, 27.1% reported that they had been unemployed one to six months in the year prior to incarceration compared to 22% of the non-participants (statistically significant). The last two employment variables placed the education participants at higher risk of recidivism than the non-participants.

Both groups were equally likely to have received benefits (a job with paid benefits is a good indicator of stable employment) paid by their employer including health insurance, annual leave or vacation, sick leave, unemployment insurance, or a retirement plan. It should be noted, however, that only a little more than 60% had health insurance paid by the employer, less than 10% had paid annual leave or vacation, only a little more than 10% had paid sick leave, and a little under one-third had a paid retirement plan.

One of the best predictors of recidivism is prior criminal behavior. In addition, based on social learning theory (Akers, 1998) family members and/or close friends who are involved in criminal behavior can also influence decisions to engage in criminal activities. Thus, we wanted to examine a number of criminal history variables including family/close friends incarceration history. What we found was that 60% of the education participants had a family history of relatives being incarcerated compared to only 51.2% of the non-participants. In both groups, almost 70% had a history of close friends from their neighborhood being incarcerated in jail or prison. Types of crimes for which the study groups were incarcerated showed that 50.2% of the education participants were incarcerated for violent crimes compared to 37.9% of the non-participants, 26.5% of the participants and 29.8% of the non-participants were incarcerated for property crimes, and 17.5% of the participants compared to 24.5% of the non-participants were incarcerated for drug offenses.

The education participants reported being younger (18.6 years of age) at age of first arrest than were the non-participants at age of first arrest (20.1 years of age). More (44.5%) of the education participants had served time in a juvenile facility than the non-participants (34.1%). Both groups had similar mean numbers of prior times in jail (5.1 times for participants and 4.7 times for non participants), and on parole (1.67 times for

participants and 1.74 times for non-participants). Participants had been placed on probation 2.6 times compared to non-participants who had been placed on probation 2.7 times. Participants had also been incarcerated in jail and prison a fewer number of times (3.6 and 2.4) compared to non-participants (3.7 and 2.6). Although the two groups showed a statistically significant difference on family history of incarceration, crime for which serving current incarceration, age at first arrest, commitment to a juvenile facility, number of times placed on probation and number of times in jail and prison, three of these variables placed the participants at greater risk and three placed the non-participants at greater risk. Overall the criminal history variables indicate that both groups shared a similar amount of risk for recidivism.

In order to assess the impact of education, we wanted to determine where both study groups were in terms of their educational backgrounds. Only 37.7% of the education participants reported completing high school, GED, vocational training, or college compared to 57.9% of the non-participants placing the participants at a higher risk of recidivism than the non-participants. For those who participated in educational programs in the year prior to incarceration, the educational participants in the study group had lower completion rates compared to the non-participants in education programs such as Adult Basic Education, high school, and GED preparation. Both groups had similar completion rates for pre-incarceration vocational training and college education.

The results of the Test of Adult Basic Education records obtained from the institutions demonstrated that both groups scored similarly on all three portions of the test. However, both groups' scores reflected low skill levels for reading (8.8 for the participants and 8.5 for the non-participants), math (7.6 for the participants and 7.5 for the non-participants) and language (6.5 for the participants and 6.2 for the non-participants) for an overall grade level of 8.0 for the participants and 7.8 for the non-

participants. The skills level was higher for the participants versus the non-participants although there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups on TABE scores. This is interesting because the participants had lower levels of educational attainment. It should be noted that both groups were below a literacy competency level of ninth grade in all areas. Because of the credentialing issue, however, the non-participants were in better shape educationally than the participants with more having completed high school or GED (a minimum level of education needed to secure meaningful employment). Participation in correctional education programs certainly enhanced the educational standing of the participants in the study group at the time of release.

Both groups reported similar rates of preparedness for return to the community after release from incarceration. Less than half of both groups (49% for the participants and 48% for the non-participants) said they had a job in the community upon release. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the participants and 83% of the non-participants believed that they had a place to live, however, a significant number of inmates (approximately 15% of 3000) were released homeless mostly to large cities/urban areas. Although 95% of both groups had a legal social security number, only 40.7% of the education participants and 45.8% of the non-participants had a photo id which is generally required for employment.

The description/characteristics of the education participants compared to the non-participants showed that the two study groups were not significantly different on a number of key variables. For the small number of variables where they did differ significantly, the difference almost always put the education participants at a greater risk of recidivism than the non-participants. Overall, the two study groups were sufficiently

equivalent to support inferences about how correctional education participation affects recidivism.

Table 2: Inmate Pre-Release Survey: Characteristics and Descriptions of Education Participants and Non-Participants (Based on Self-Reporting)

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